

DIRECTIVE BRINGS TOGETHER EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

By: Richard Searles, FHP&R Staff Writer

When and where the next disaster will strike is unknown. However, the nation has to be prepared for it to happen at anytime and at any place. Whether it's an anthrax attack in Atlanta or an earthquake in Escondido, CA, trained health care providers need to respond quickly and consistently. Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD) – 21, “Public Health and Medical Preparedness,” directs that health and emergency response professionals, communities and individuals be prepared. The directive complements and further implements related requirements specified in the 2006 Pandemic and All Hazards Preparedness Act (PAHPA).

To prepare for health catastrophes, the directive stresses that emergency planners take a regional approach and coordinate across all levels of government. As most health care assets are privately owned, non-government entities need to be fully engaged. Communities and individuals are key participants as well in the process of readiness and resiliency. HSPD-21 advocates an effective response that is organized in a rationally designated system, where responders deploy in a coordinated manner, and people receive accurate and timely information.

In implementing HSPD 21 six Federal working groups were created, each focusing on major aspects and objectives of a public health and medical preparedness:

1. Biosurveillance-establishing a national epidemiologic surveillance system
2. Countermeasures distribution – providing needed medicines and supplies at the disaster site within 48 hours
3. Mass casualty care response - fielding assets and resources in a rapid, flexible, scalable, sustainable, comprehensive, well-coordinated, and appropriate manner
4. Community resilience – improving individual and family preparedness
5. Risk awareness – providing health threat information to individuals and communities
6. Education and training – developing core competencies and standards

Specifically on education and training, HSPD-21 led to the creation of the Federal Education and Training Interagency Group (FETIG). The FETIG coordinates activities and programming across the U.S. government related to education and training in public health and medical preparedness and response. The FETIG charter was signed in November 2008 by the Departments of Defense (DoD), Health & Human Services (HHS), Homeland Security, Veterans Affairs (VA), and Transportation (DOT). The FETIG participants also include the Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Labor (DOL), and

the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). All of these agencies have a mission to train and educate responders to disasters. The FETIG held their inaugural meeting in December 2008 and has since developed its vision as “a nation educated and trained effectively to respond to medical and public health emergencies.”

“The ultimate function of the FETIG is to become a central platform for Federal partners to further integrate and synchronize myriad activities related to disaster medicine and public health preparedness,” said Capt. D.W. Chen, a DoD representative to the FETIG and its co-chairman. “Our mission is to advise on public health and medical education and training standards across government, academia, and private entities so that disaster medicine and public health core curricula contribute to an effective national response to all-hazards.”

By the end of September 2009, the FETIG intends to develop a stakeholder engagement strategy and participate in the drafting the National Health Security Strategy. By 2011, the plan is to promote and coordinate Federal activities to align disaster medicine and public health education and training core curricula to the National Preparedness Guidelines and the National Response Framework. Finally, within five years, the FETIG objectives include overseeing the establishment of a disaster medicine and public health education and training research program.

The FETIG serves as the coordinating mechanism for core competencies and education and training standards across Federal departments and agencies. The FETIG will build on previous Federal efforts to oversee the development of medical and public health disaster preparedness and response core competencies and will provide oversight to an academic joint program.

HSPD-21 directed the establishment of an academic joint program for disaster medicine and public health at a new National Center for Disaster Medicine and Public Health. In October 2008, an official charter was signed by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs creating the National Center for Disaster Medicine and Public Health at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS) in Bethesda, Maryland.

The National Center, as a permanent part of the University, will serve as the academic home to develop and propagate core competencies, training, research, and education related to disaster medicine, behavioral health and public health. The National Center will co-locate, whenever possible, the related specialties of domestic medical preparedness and response, international health, international disaster and humanitarian medical and public health assistance, and military medicine. The FETIG will provide advice and guidance to the new Center and its activities.

To complete all the provisions of HSPD-21 requires the assistance and collaboration of Federal agencies, state/local government, colleges and universities, and professional organizations at all levels. One of the first of many non-Federal partner

organizations that will be engaged is Yale New Haven Health System (YNH), a designated Center for Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Response.

“They (YNH) are working under a task order under USNORTHCOM to conduct a comprehensive study of public health emergency preparedness and medical disaster education and training programs available to practitioners currently in the workforce that require training as mandated through PAHPA and other regulatory and standards organizations,” said Capt. Chen.

Working together and with its partners, the FETIG and the new National Center will help steward creation of consistent medical and public health preparedness education and training programs that will serve to enhance our nation's response to medical disasters.

